

“We’re in luck today, boys” were the first words out of my mouth. We had just settled in behind our glasses on top of a massive rock outcropping that conveniently overlooked a sea of Arctic birch and willows.

It was late September in the extreme northern region of British Columbia, smack dab in the middle of the moose rut. I was no stranger to hunting moose in this part of the world as over the years I had guided many hunters to their trophy bulls. The difference this time was now, for the first time, I had my own tag, and it was burning a hole in my pocket! To add “very expensive” fuel to the fire, I only had two days to get the job done. On the bright side, this was the first morning, and I had two capable partners to help me out: Dennis Stabe, a longtime friend who had just tagged his own bull days before, and Byron Vonhagen, my wrangler for the season.

We flew off the steep hillside as fast as I could push, quickly readied our horses, and stormed towards the bull. In hind sight, we had plenty of time as the big guy had corralled

his lady friend out in the open and appeared content for the day, out of reach from any possible satellite suitors. Nevertheless, a certain anxious panic always takes over the hunter’s brain when the moment of attack presents itself. I had a history with this bull, and I was not going to wait for a fourth chance at him.

About 20 days earlier, I was in the same area with a client and had spotted the bull on two separate occasions. Both encounters offered slim chances of success from the onset. The mature bull always lingered tightly to the impenetrable cover, offering only brief glimpses of his antlers. Long story short, both times ended with the bull pulling a disappearing act right before our eyes. This time, however, he was bedded out in the open, and as is so often the case with mature game animals of all species,



Brad Fry of Spiritwood, Saskatchewan, with the huge bull moose he took in northern British Columbia. The bull has a spread of 55 inches and grosses 195 inches. Hunts like this, we can only dream about and it is definitely an adventure of a lifetime.

GUIDE'S HUNT

BY BRAD FRY

This photo shows us the beautiful country these moose call home.



the only way to ever get an opportunity at them is when they make a mistake, and he had just made his!

In short order, we had closed the distance considerably thanks to our ponies, BlackJack, Govenor and Roach. Staying back a safe distance that provided cover for our horses, we tied them up, organized our packs, and continued another quarter-mile on foot. The ground was excellent, firm, flat, and sparsely vegetated, allowing us to avoid the usual shin-tangled mess the stunted birch often provide. The wind was strong and directly in our favour, allowing for great progress right up until we reached the 450-yard mark. Here, we hunkered down out of the wind behind a small ancient esker to assess our position. I was

notice me and Byron crouched down in the water, waddling along like two ducks. It was like an ostrich with his head stuck in the sand scenario, "If I keep my head down and don't look up, the bull won't see us." Well, even with that said, the wind was howling and the bull was nestled down in the birch, facing the other way. We did have a chance, but as it turned out, not a good one.

After only 20 yards of our best duck impression, without warning and all in one motion, the great bull wheeled and stood straight up, instantly pinning us down. We were now in a standoff! Although Byron and I had already climbed dozens of mountains and walked hundreds of miles so far that season, we weren't going to be able to continue our 90-degree leg bend forever. It was up to the bull's instincts now. It was his choice. Would he recognize us as a threat and head for cover, or would the urge to have a go at preserving his genes cloud his judgment? Byron and I were rooting for the latter!

Minutes later and just as my waterproof boots were completing their failure process, the lady factor took over, the bull dismissed us as harmless, bedded back down, and we reversed our direction, sloshing for the closest cover. After reaching drier ground, we crawled down into a shallow drainage, and although we were still in sight of the bull, he never looked back as we eventually made it back to full cover where Dennis was situated and filming the entire episode. I must admit, after regaining my senses and realizing we were still in the game, I don't know what I was thinking. It was now blatantly obvious we had no chance of pulling that stalk off. It was back to the drawing board.

After a short surveillance of the surrounding landscape and an even shorter meeting of the minds, it was apparent what we were going to have to do. Instead of taking the lazy shortcut route that didn't work, we were forced to back up, circle around to the north a solid half-mile, cross another swamp, then make our way across yet another spongy marsh, all just to get within approximately 600 yards of the bull. In other words, "the hard work route." At which time, if we were successful and the wind didn't change, we would relocate the moose and then plan the final stalk to get within range.

I think I have heard it before, something referring to "hard work always pays" or "patience pays," something like that. Anyway, an hour later and you guessed it – it worked! We were now within 300 yards thanks to a short belly crawl. I was set up on a pair of shooting sticks, the video camera was on standby, the wind was perfect, I was hardly nervous, and the bull was bedded.

Ten minutes later, he was still bedded, 20 minutes, then 40 minutes. I was starting to get the cold shivers, and the bedded bull would only tease us with an ever so slight head turn every five minutes or so. I couldn't take it anymore! I am a true believer that the vast majority of the excitement of a hunt is the

Brad crossing a river on his trip out of the rugged British Columbia terrain.



now faced with a decision. Between us and the honeymooners was a wide open marsh with ankle-deep water stretching to within 75 yards of the pair, then an abrupt incline of roughly five feet rose out of the swamp, signifying dry ground of the opposite shore. If we could somehow make it across, I would have a golden opportunity at this guy from "gimme" range, but if we got busted, game over!

I often preach to myself not to over-think a stalk, keep the wind in my face, stay quiet and out of sight, and walla, you are good to go. Simple, right? Right . . . except for this stalk I had somehow overlooked the stay-out-of-sight part, perhaps thinking this lovestruck bull was in a rut daze and wouldn't

anticipation, but by now I had endured all the anticipation I wanted.

I needed to do something to speed up this process because I was literally shaking from the cold and lack of movement, which was not ideal given the yardage I faced, rest or no rest. I turned around and asked Byron to sneak back and head off to the left a good 200 yards and once there give a couple of calls. I calculated that the mature bull would surely want to see what was going on and stand up, thus presenting my itchy finger with the opportunity to scratch!

No sooner had Byron left and I could hear his distant call. Dennis had the camera rolling, and my adrenaline surged for the millionth time that day as I readied for the shot. This was it, here we go . . . anytime now . . .

Ten minutes and numerous calls later, the bull never even turned his head in Byron's direction. Shortly thereafter, Byron returned to our position amongst the willows and confirmed the bull's lack of interest. I wasn't about to wait any longer; I needed to get up and, if nothing else, move to generate a little body heat. I asked Byron what he could see from where he had called, and my ears perked up when he described the higher vantage point and better view he had of the bull. That was all I needed to hear, and off we went.

During our conversation, Byron had said it would only take minutes to reach the new location. I was positive the sluggish bull would sit tight and allow us to get set up on him. Of course, I was wrong! As we were half-crouched over, cresting a small ridge, I checked back in the bull's direction, and there he was, standing up and sticking out like a sore thumb! The

fancy tiptoeing stealthy approach was over. It was go-time!

All three of us dove for cover and went into action. I slammed my shooting sticks into the tundra and snapped off a few interfering branches as Byron ranged the yardage. Dennis activated the camera, slapped it on the tripod, and gave me the go-ahead.

"316" was Byron's reply.

My mind quickly did the calculations for the trajectory of my weathered .338, and with the ignition of the first cartridge, its dark damp days of riding around in my saddle scabbard were over. It had been an eternity since I had enjoyed the part of the hunter and it felt good!

After a clip full of bullets had been eagerly sent on their way, the lumbering bull simply tipped over and the anticipation part of my hunt was over. Then, after trying to rip Byron and Dennis' arms off with the traditional high-fives, we regained our composure and headed over to my bull. It didn't matter how many times I had seen the picture before me, this time was different. I didn't have my usual guide thoughts of, *What's he going to score, how many hours of daylight are left, can I get him caped before dark, can I get the horses over here, is it going to pour rain on us?* . . . This time I didn't care. I just stood there, soaking in everything, remembering what it felt like to be a hunter.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Brad Fry owns an outfitting camp in northern Saskatchewan, and his clients have taken some impressive whitetails over the years. His camp is called Canadian Outback Outfitters. Brad can be reached at (306) 883-2960. 🐾